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and wonderful gymnastic...

DANCE PERSPECTIVES
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in perspective

Notoriety, glamor, sordidness, and beauty have all been associated with the belly-dance. In the novels of Lawrence Durrell it is the stock-in-trade of the sad, cheap entertainer. Yet a century ago its exponents made gifted writers rhapsodize about their art. And still earlier, some say . . . But our conceptions of the *danse du ventre,* like our ideas about the Arab world itself, have been clouded with misinterpretations.

For this issue of DANCE PERSPECTIVES we have selected a sociologist and a dancer to unravel some of the mysteries of the Middle East and its famous dance. Both know the area and its art from first-hand experience.

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Above and on title page: Gérome's "Danse d'almées," 1864 (Jean-Marie Carré, *Voyageurs et Écrivains Français en Égypte*)

The Arab Danse du Ventre

by MORROE BERGER

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Dancing Girls at Cairo (David Roberts, *Egypt and Nubia*, vol. III)

An embarrassing tradition

Spiritualism and sex predominate in the Western image of the Near East. For centuries explorers, and tourists after them, have made pilgrimages to the tombs and temples of Egypt. But they have also gone to the public squares and more recently the cabarets to see the performers of the *danse du ventre,* the belly-dancers, whose fame reached the West long before they themselves appeared here.

As early as the sixteenth century European writers were using popular stereotypes of Turkish splendor in costume and female expertise in the dance. Later, Europe became more familiar with the Arab world to the west, so that by now the belly-dance (which its sensitive practitioners prefer to call the Oriental dance*) is identified chiefly with the Arabs. Egypt, especially, has added dancers to its main exports of cotton to Europe and school teachers to other Arab countries.

The Oriental dance made its first spectacular appearance in America at the Chicago Fair in 1893. Displayed exclusively for its combination of the exotic with the erotic, it acquired a reputation that has been reinforced by the ignorance and laziness of countless writers for the stage and movies. Even the serious art of Ruth St. Denis was not enough to overcome the stereotype so easily created and perpetuated. Our amused but disparaging tolerance of this genuinely artistic dance, thus, long antedates the time, a decade ago, when Samia Gamal became the favorite of two Kings: the pet dancer of Farouk and the second wife of Sheppard King, scion of a Texas oil family, whose momentary conversion to Eastern ways was so profound that he went so far as to become a Moslem and to adopt the name of Abdallah, slave of God. The same condescending attitude has been evoked by the current popularity of cafes in New York City that feature "Oriental dancers," who are more in the tradition of American burlesque than of the genuine art.[1]

It is not my purpose to vindicate the Oriental dance, but merely to tell something of its appeal and meaning, and to de-

*In America we think of "Oriental" as referring to the Far East, but in French and Arabic this is the term used to designate the dance of the Arab world.

scribe both the dance and the dancers. To vindicate it would require not only a cultural crusade to achieve an aesthetic conversion of America but, ironically, to do the same thing among Westernized Arabs, who are beginning to consider themselves above their own popular arts. Just as the educated elite turn away from local arts and crafts, preferring ornate, French house furnishings (or lately the lean, Scandinavian style), so they are becoming embarrassed by the Oriental dance though they still enjoy it. From time to time a wave of prudery engulfs Moslem Arabs, whose religion is stricter than Christianity in forbidding women to make themselves sexually attractive. More than a century ago an Egyptian ruler banished the Oriental dancers from Cairo. The present regime, less extreme, has contented itself with requiring them to cover themselves from neck to ankles. So the Oriental dance must now be defended not only against Western denigration but also against the solemnity of the newly-independent Arab world itself.

The latest evidence of official and elitist embarrassment over the belly-dance is the government's encouragement and the public's enthusiastic reception of a troupe of Cairo students who combine certain cautious gestures in the direction of the traditional Oriental dance with a greater emphasis on modern techniques drawing upon folk material. The Reda troupe, whom I saw in the Cairo Opera House last winter, are talented and interesting. I do not mean to belittle them when I say that part of their popularity stems from the fact that they provide a native Egyptian dance form that need not be identified with the disreputable (though appreciated) *danse du ventre.*[2]

From ancient Egypt?

No one can say exactly how much the Oriental dance of today resembles that of earlier eras. Evidence for a general resemblance appears in the work of al-Mas'ūdī, an Arab historian who died in the tenth century A.D. In his account of the world since the creation, which he called *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems,*

he relates that in the ninth century, just after the golden age of Baghdad, Caliph Mu'tamid asked a scholar to tell him what qualities made a dancer great. The scholar began his reply with a brief statement of eight kinds of rhythm. Then he described the temperament and physique a great dancer must have. Among the latter qualities he mentioned one that indicates he probably had in mind something like the Oriental dance of today. A great dancer, he told the Caliph, must have "loose joints and a great agility in twirling and in swaying her hips." [3]

The dancing girls themselves have for years claimed that their costume, movements, and gestures are deliberately based on the dance of ancient Egypt. They may be right, but they are hardly reliable experts, for whatever their accomplishments may be, Egyptology and archaeology are not among them. They make these claims, of course, for the same reason that they minimize the sexual aspect of their dance: to give them what they consider greater respectability, as if their art were not enough to recommend them. Besides, it makes good conversation with tourists. So great an Orientalist as Edward William Lane, whose nineteenth-century *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* is a classic, was probably taken in by this talk. He not only professed to have found similarities between the Oriental dance and the ancient dances represented in the tombs but even thought the dancers themselves might have been descended from those of Pharaonic times.[4] The evidence simply does not exist.

On the other hand, some scholars insist there is no similarity at all. About thirty years ago a Czech scholar, who loved ancient Egyptian culture, was so incensed by the dancing girls' claim to pedigree that he set his daughter to studying all the illustrations in the tombs, from which both concluded that the modern dance came not from ancient Egypt but from the later Etruscans of Italy.[5] Unfortunately for this thesis, however, the illustrations the lady published show some similarity, at least in the postures, between the ancient and modern dancers. Moreover, the costumes of both eras resemble each other too, though the Pharaonic dancing girls normally wore far less and indeed are often represented as dancing in the nude.

Further evidence of similarity in the dances comes from certain

ancient accounts. The Roman poets of the first century A.D., Juvenal and Martial, wrote of the famous dancing girls of Cadiz, the port in Spain which, colonized by the Phoenecians and the Carthaginians before falling to Rome, received Oriental influences. Juvenal disapprovingly describes the girls who dance sensuously, "sinking down with quivering thighs to the floor." [6] Martial, too, promised his guests no girls from "wanton" Cadiz who "with endless prurience swing lascivious loins in practiced writhings." [7] It is likely that the dancers from Phoenecia, then Carthage, and finally from Roman Egypt introduced farther west these movements that Lane, writing eighteen hundred years after Juvenal and Martial, recognized as the very ones he saw in Cairo.

Travelers in an antique land

To describe the Oriental dance has never been an easy task. A French savant who accompanied Napoleon on his Egyptian adventure in 1798 was so overwhelmed by it that he wrote in the great study, which he and his colleagues published on Egypt: "It is impossible to describe this sort of dance with exactitude in our language." [8] Fifty years later Gustave Flaubert, whose experience with a famous *almée* in Egypt left an indelible effect upon his spirit (and perhaps his body), attributed the inadequacy to himself rather than to the French language. Concerning a private *soirée* he lamented in a letter to a friend: "I spare you any description of the dance—it wouldn't come off." [9]

Other travelers were less reticent, including an American contemporary of Flaubert's, George William Curtis.* Probably within weeks of one another, Flaubert and Curtis visited the same dancer in Upper Egypt, far from Cairo, in the winter of 1850. Still in his twenties, Curtis shocked many readers of the New York *Tribune* that year with a description of the belly-dance.

*Curtis came from a highly respected New England family. He was at Brook Farm, knew Emerson and the Transcendentalists, and achieved fame as an orator, essayist, and earnest social reformer.

Egyptian dancer. French, probably late nineteenth century
(Collection of Bernard Lewis)

> Kutchuk stood motionless . . . The sharp surges of sound swept around the room, dashing in regular measure against her movelessness, until suddenly the whole surface of her frame quivered in measure with the music. Her hands were raised, clapping the castanets, and she slowly turned upon herself, her right leg the pivot, marvellously convulsing all the muscles of her body. When she had completed the circuit of the spot on which she stood, she advanced slowly, all the muscles jerking in time to the music, and in solid, substantial spasms.
>
> It was a curious and wonderful gymnastic. There was no graceful dancing—once only there was the movement of dancing when she advanced, throwing one leg before the other, as gypsies dance. But the rest was voluptuous motion . . . The music still swelled savagely . . . Suddenly stopping, still muscularly moving, Kutchuk fell upon her knees, and writhed with body, arms, and head upon the floor, still in measure—still clanking the castanets, and arose in the same manner. It was profoundly dramatic . . . It was a lyric of love, which words cannot tell . . . Still she retreated, . . . and making the same circuit upon herself, she sat down, and after this violent and extravagant exertion was marbly cold.[10]

Except for its extreme sensuality, this description fits the most widespread form of the *danse du ventre* to this day and indicates its chief characteristic: expression by movement of body, arms and head, rather than legs—movements restricted in space but correspondingly intense within their narrow compass. Since he was watching a dancer who was also a celebrated courtesan, Curtis saw a dance which had at least as much lasciviousness as grace. Far from abandoning himself to his entertainer, as Flaubert willingly did, Curtis claimed a degree of self-control which the readers of the *Tribune* must have welcomed. "Farewell, Kutchuk!" he wrote. "Addio, still-eyed dove! Almost thou persuadest me to pleasure. O Wall Street, Wall Street! because you are virtuous, shall there be no more cakes and ale?" [11]

A more knowledgeable traveler was the British journalist,

James Augustus St. John, an expert linguist, who walked up and down Egypt and Nubia in 1832-34. Knowing his way about, he was able to find dancers in Cairo despite their banishment. His description of two young girls, both under twenty, stresses passion without an overload of sex: "Their eyes shot fire, their bosoms heaved and panted, and their bodies assumed the most varied attitudes and inflexions. They twined round each other snakelike, with a suppleness and a grace, such as I had never seen before."[12] St. John also saw the dancers who were pantomime artists, "accomplished actresses" who had not received from travelers "all the praises they deserve." This mixture of story and sex he found so attractive he predicted that a company of such dancers, "engaged by an opera manager, would draw crowded houses in Paris or London."[13] That they have not shows the strength of the exaggerated association of the Oriental dancer with the courtesan. Logically this should not detract from the artistry of the dance when properly performed. In the last century, however, in accordance with an irreversible law of increasing division of labor, belly-dancing and prostitution have become more and more separated until today they are still joined only at the least artistic level of each.

Another traveler who made the journey up the Nile was the eminent American Henry Adams. But he left no published record of the *danse du ventre,* perhaps because it was on his honeymoon that he saw it. His wife, who was easily shocked, wrote to her father from Karnak: "Last evening we saw some dancing girls at the consul's house, but were not amused or pleased. They are neither graceful nor pretty and simply writhed and contorted themselves, and struck us as quite unpleasant. They had ugly stuff gowns and altogether ignored anything like Eastern gorgeousness. I fancy in Cairo one could see it very differently got up."[14] That was in 1873. Exactly twenty years later (when Mrs. Adams had been dead eight years) Henry Adams saw the Oriental dance again. That was on the Midway of the Chicago Fair (or the World's Columbian Exposition as it was formally known). In a letter to his friend John Hay (later Secretary of State), Adams wrote that he found the Midway a "sweet repose." He added: "I revelled in all its fakes and frauds, all its wickedness that seemed

not to be understood by our innocent natives, and all its genuineness which was understood still less."[15]

Did he consider the belly-dance genuine? I like to think he was able to view it without prejudice, for several years earlier he had seen the Siva dance in Samoa, which he highly appreciated despite its sensuousness and the half-nude state of its dancers. Curiously, his description of the passionate performance and the exciting evening ends with a sense of tranquility that resembles Flaubert's account (quoted below) of a longer and less innocent venture in Upper Egypt. When the girls "went off to their houses," Adams wrote, "our household sank into a perfect quiet, and we slept in our clothes on the floor as comfortably as we knew how, while the kerosene lamp burned all night in the centre of the floor." [16]

Little Egypt

The Chicago Fair, which celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America, was the occasion for the introduction of the Oriental dance to this continent. Such is the personal testimony of Mr. Sol Bloom, a colorful promoter of entertainment.* Bloom had been greatly impressed by an Algerian village exhibited at the Paris International Exposition in 1889. "I doubt very much," he wrote in his autobiography,[17] "whether anything resembling it was ever seen in Algeria, but I was not at the time concerned with trifles. The Algerians themselves were genuine beyond question . . . I knew that nothing like these dancers, acrobats, glass-eaters and scorpion swallowers had ever been seen in the Western Hemisphere . . ." At the adventurous age of nineteen, Bloom paid a thousand dollars for the exclusive rights to exhibit the group on this side of the Atlantic.

Back in the United States, Bloom found no interest in the Algerian performers to match his own. When, in 1890, he learned

*Bloom later enjoyed a second career in politics, serving as a Congressman from New York City from 1923 until his death in 1949. During this time he was a staunch supporter of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and chairman of the powerful Committee on Foreign Relations.

Sheet music cover (Chicago Historical Society)

that an international exposition was planned for Chicago, he went there to sell his Algerians. He found things in confusion and managed to pick up little more information than that a

Midway Plaisance was contemplated to house all the entertainment. When he took the job of managing the amusement concessions for the Exposition, Bloom found out "why there had been no progress." The Midway, it appeared, had been placed under the direction of the Fair's Department of Ethnology. It was later put in charge of a more appropriate section.

The Department of Ethnology, whatever Bloom thought of it, continued to take an interest in the Midway because of the presence there of many small "communities" and "villages" from little-known parts of the world. The Superintendent of the Division of Folklore insisted on the genuine character of these groups, including the dancers and other entertainers from Turkey and its Arab provinces, as well as from Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. "The Midway Plaisance," he was bold enough to say, "was a field for wide and important investigations." If the physical sciences and technology had their imposing exhibits, the social sciences had the Midway, which "furnished to the ethnologist and the general student material for study equal to that furnished to other specialists in other departments of the Exposition." [18]

As manager of the Midway, Bloom's course was clear to bring the Algerian Village to America: "All I had to do was approve it myself." He did his work too quickly and too well, for the Algerian dancers, musicians and sword swallowers arrived exactly a year too early. So Bloom put them to work on the fair grounds. When they finally opened the show in 1893, he was very pleased. "I never got tired of my own Algerian village," he wrote. "What artists they were! Particularly the ballet troupe, with their great specialty, the *danse du ventre.*" Bloom was able to separate the dance from the stereotype. "It is regrettable," he pointed out sixty years after the Fair, "that more people remember the reputation of the *danse du ventre* than the dance itself. . . . When the public learned that the literal translation was 'belly dance' they delightedly concluded that it must be salacious and immoral. The crowds poured in. I had a gold mine."

Then came trouble. Some people who saw the Algerian Village dancers complained to the Exposition's directors. After an investigation, it was purged of "any tendencies toward indecency or vulgarity," according to a contemporary unofficial chronicle.

"This," the observer remarked with satisfaction, "is as it should be." [19] Bloom stuck to his own favorable judgment. "As a matter of strict fact," he insisted, "the *danse du ventre,* while sensuous and exciting, was a masterpiece of rhythm and beauty; it was choreographic perfection, and it was so recognized by even the most untutored spectators. Whatever they had hoped to see, they were enchanted by the entertainment actually placed before them."

The belly-dance introduced at the Chicago Fair found imitators all over the country, but, Bloom asserted, in "debased and vulgarized" form. Dancers calling themselves "Little Egypt" appeared in several places, claiming to have come from the Chicago Exposition. This could have been true, but Bloom, contrary to the popular conception, denied that any dancer by that name appeared on the Midway, though one who used it later turned up in Coney Island. This "Little Egypt" was said to have indeed come fresh from Chicago. Though she soon had many imitators in Coney Island itself, interest in the belly-dance fell off, according to one account, and by 1903 the art had only one practitioner of unspecified authenticity.[20] Thus the first blooming of excitement about the Oriental dance in America soon withered.

The Chicago Fair had a great impact on the country, and Henry Adams was among those deeply affected by it. He liked not only the Midway, but the whole spirit of the Fair and especially its architecture. The architect of the Administration Building, perhaps the most highly regarded of the Fair's structures, was Richard Morris Hunt, one of America's most influential builders.* Like Curtis and Adams, he, too, had made the journey up the Nile, taking the trip in 1852-53, only two years after Curtis and Flaubert. He kept a diary of the voyage,[21] in which he recorded that he saw dancers in several villages on evenings when the lack of a good wind prevented the party from pushing on. These stops became orgies that he found disgusting, so it is not likely that he

*In 1843, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, Hunt had gone to Paris, where he was the first American to study at the École des Beaux Arts. Twelve years later he returned to America to lead a revival of French classical architecture. He built mansions in Newport and New York for such families as the Astors, the Belmonts, and the Vanderbilts. He designed the first office tower and the first apartment house with elevators, the base and pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, a chapel at Princeton, and the Fogg Museum at Harvard.

saw the belly-dance performed properly. Forty years later, however, he again became strangely, if impersonally, involved with the dance in Chicago, where Arab girls went to perform on the Midway and he to create the Fair's main building, a stone's throw away.

The movement of the serpent

There are several kinds of dance in the Arab world. One is a somewhat faithful copy of the ancient Egyptian dance as it has come down the millennia or has been studied from works of art found in the tombs. This angular, geometrical, apparently slow, and relatively chaste movement is still performed, though rarely. Another is the "classical" dance, one form of which tells a story or imitates animals or plants, and is often a series of improvisations. In other forms it is a dance of greeting, of mourning, entreating, and so on. Finally there is the *danse du ventre*. It has a folk quality, for it is danced by boys and girls, men and women, in some Arab villages; there it is sexual but only moderately so. The belly-dance of the entertainer is, of course, more passionate and sexual than the folk version.

Several leading performers in Cairo have insisted to me that the sexual element is exaggerated. Thus, Yasmine, a young and articulate dancer, who has recently become very popular in Cairo, was quick and glib enough to remind me that evil is in the eye of the beholder. (But so is beauty, I reminded her in turn.) At first I put this modesty down to the dancers' aspiration to higher artistic standing than is due them. I have become convinced, however, that they are right—but only to a certain extent, for I find it difficult to see the Oriental dance so devoid of sexual interest as they claim. But certainly sex is not incompatible with beauty, and it constitutes a part of almost every form of dance from primitive to ballet.

In earlier centuries the *danse du ventre* was far more sexual, and the dancers exposed their breasts entirely or almost so.

Lascivious performances in private were also common. Among them was a fore-runner of the strip-tease, called the "dance of the bee." The French nineteenth-century writer Prisse d'Avennes described it as follows: The prettiest of several dancers comes forward and quivers as if stung by a bee. Her companions dance around her looking for it. They begin to strip her clothing piece by piece as she assumes provocative poses. The hunt is fruitless, of course, and the dancer stands forth in the nude, going through endless gyrations as she suffers the pain inflicted by the elusive bee.[22]

Left: Hoda Shams Eddin (Collection of Haroutyoun Shiklanian). Above: Nineteenth-century dancing girl (France, Commission des Monuments d'Égypte, *Description de l'Égypte, État Moderne)*

Today's belly-dance is not so lewd as that described by observers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First, the costume now reveals less of the dancer's body. Frequently she wears a long, skin-tight gown. For specialty numbers she may wear the *baladi* ("traditional" or "country") dress of white cotton. This is a combination of a loose shirt and (what appears to us as) a long nightgown, with a sash around the hips. (Yasmine

prefers a semi-transparent adaptation of the *baladi* gown.) Second, the dancers now move about rather more. Their art lies not only in moving certain muscles while standing in the same place, but also in a pleasing motion of the body while in graceful locomotion.

The *danse du ventre* has a set series of movements, though their order is not invariable. The performer begins with a veil around her head and shoulders and walks about for a few moments. She soon removes the veil and executes rhythmic movements of the various parts of the body: meanwhile the music alternates fast and slow in accordance with her preference. An early movement is made by the belly alone: it is pulled in and pushed out in a smooth, undulating motion. The dancer moves her breasts horizontally while she stands or walks. Then one hip at a time is rolled: upward, downward, sideward. This rolling is also done with a simultaneous movement of the belly in the opposite direction. At this time the dancer stands or walks sideways. Trembling of the breasts and belly is executed while standing still.

Next the dancer makes a series of dramatic tableaux, during which the music is slow and played in a succession of solos. She follows with movements that carry her about the floor to lively rhythms played by the ensemble. In this sequence she usually takes up her castanets,* and the audience clap their hands in rhythm; some onlookers rise to dance in place or even on the stage (if the atmosphere is not too formal and forbidding). A popular movement comes at this stage, when the dancer raises one leg slightly as she rolls the same hip. While standing still, she shakes her shoulders, swings her arms, and snaps her fingers. In the course of a low backbend, which ends with her entire spine on the floor, she shakes her shoulders and breasts smoothly and slowly. She may then repeat the rapid movements before she concludes the dance with a few turns.

Whether in Pharaonic Egypt, Roman Cadiz, nineteenth-century Cairo, or the area from Morocco to Afghanistan today,

*The Arabic word *sagāt* is conventionally translated as "castanets," and this is the term regularly used by English writers. They should not, however, be identified with the wooden castanets of Spain. Also called *crotales,* or *petits crotales,* the *sagāt* are metal finger cymbals.

Above: Nineteenth-century dancing girls (Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*). Below: Yasmine, dancing at the Belvedere Roof of the Nile Hilton Hotel in Cairo, 1960.

the *danse du ventre* is essentially one of form rather than locomotion. Most Western dances involve movement across large spaces, but the Oriental dance stresses movement of various parts of the body while the performer remains in the same place. It is the arms, hands, torso and hips that move, rather than the legs. Though the gyrations of torso and hips are sexually suggestive, beautiful movements of arms and hands are equally important to the good dancer, and are sensual without being directly sexual. She moves from spot to spot only for variety and to enable all of her audience to see her from several angles and distances; such locomotion is not part of the dance itself except in one or two cases. Though stationary, however, the performer does use her legs to help her move the rest of her body.

In these movements, the good dancer strives for a smooth, circular, elliptical and undulating motion, rather than a sharp, angular one (though today there are some movements of this kind too). One of Cairo's leading dancers, Hoda Shams Eddin, who deserves to be known in the West, says the effect must be that of a serpent's movement. "The flute," she told me, moving her hands expressively in the air and across the table, "makes what I think of as the *sound* of the serpent. So I must make his *movements*." I think this remark points to the essential character of the dance; like the serpent, the dancer moves slowly, in undulations. The two are, in a sense, all torso and no legs. Because movement through space is only incidental, the Oriental dancer trains herself in as many intricate movements of her body as she can master. There are certain standard ones that all performers do, but then each good one develops not only her own style but also her own special movements of the abdomen, breasts, back, or hips, always in conjunction with those of the hands, arms, shoulders, head, face, and even the expression of the eyes. Oriental and African dances in general stress movements of parts of the body other than the legs; in some societies women "dance" with their hands, in others they cultivate a quivering of the thighs, in still others the lips or even the larynx is the chief thing to move—no part, indeed, seems to have been ignored.

Because upper-limb movements are so important, the best of the Oriental dancers take at least some classical ballet training

to acquire an appreciation of them. Sonia Ivanova, Russian-born and British-trained, who is now a leading teacher of ballet in Cairo, has taught several of the better belly-dancers, including Hoda Shams Eddin. Mlle. Ivanova, with whom I have seen Oriental dancing in Cairo, insists that it can be as artistically sublime as classical ballet.

I should emphasize three features of the *danse du ventre:* it is a series of "stills," so to speak; it stresses sexual modesty as well as display; it is as sedative as it is stimulating.

Since the Oriental dancer does not achieve her main effects by moving across large spaces, but by movements of parts of her body while she stands in the same place, the total impression is one of a succession of still pictures executed in different positions in relation to the onlooker. In each place she produces her movements, gestures and facial expressions, building up a series of tableaux. The effect of the dance is somewhat like that of Arab art in general. That is, it depends upon form, the arrangement of parts within a compressed area, as in a mosaic. It is not an art of abandon, but largely of restraint and control. Each tableau is cumulative in effect, and the series is likewise cumulative in its impact upon the senses until a climax is reached. Then there is release, a *dénouement,* in a very rhythmic and lively movement, followed by several spins upon which the dance ends.

Though this cumulative effect is often compared (by inexperienced observers, who are quick to adopt profound metaphors) to the rise and fall of the sexual act itself, I don't think the Oriental dance does this any more than a tap dance or an acrobatic dance. Most works of temporal art build up an emotional impact and then offer release, just as forms of nature move in waves and cycles. The *danse du ventre* is sexual, of course, but it is so in a tension between display and modesty, exposure and concealment. The dancer alternates provocative movements with sedate poses and gestures. At the start she uses the veil to conceal and reveal, without being coquettish or coy. Hoda Shams Eddin pointed out to me that the dancers use this veiling as the Arab woman does her *melaya,* the large piece of black or colored material which she wraps around herself. I have seen these women

achieve similarly provocative effects by manipulating the apparently shapeless folds of this garment to accentuate this or that part of the body beneath it. The dancer uses her hands and arms for the same purpose, now hiding her face and now revealing it; in those sections of Arab society where the West has least penetrated, it is still more modest to conceal the face than other parts of the body. (In 1849 Flaubert wrote his mother from Alexandria concerning the veil: "On the other hand, if you don't see their faces, you see their entire bosoms. As you change countries, you find that modesty changes its location, like a bored traveler who keeps shifting from one seat in the carriage to another."[23])

Yasmine, 1960.

The costume of an Oriental dancer today helps her by *not* revealing too much of her body; she achieves her sexual effect by moving her body rather than merely by displaying it. The costume is thus designed more to accentuate her movements than to reveal herself—hence the veil, the breast-covering, the long gown which is sometimes not even transparent, and the trinkets which adorn her head, arms, throat, torso and ankles. Concerning one part of the dancer's costume, the tight band around her hips, I have found some confusion. St. John, who carefully observed the Cairo scene more than a century ago, claimed that this girdle is essential to enable the dancer to execute the movements.[24] Mlle. Ivanova has told me the same thing, as has the dancer Yasmine. But Hoda Shams Eddin insists that the girdle is there merely for its decorative effect and to accentuate the dancer's hips. I believe it also makes the belly protrude somewhat, with the result that any motion is easily magnified. Because the essence of the Oriental dance is motion rather than display, it has not been seriously cramped by the recent requirement in Egypt that dancers be covered, even if only with a transparent material, from shoulders to ankles.

By combining modesty with display and by its flowing, undulating movements, the *danse du ventre,* I believe, has a sedative, pacifying quality which attenuates its sexual excitation. I do not deny that it is sexually arousing, but I think it is more so for the Westerner than for the Arab, which may account in part for the reputation the dance has in Europe and America. Upon the Arab the regular, smooth and liquid movements of the dancer have a semi-hypnotic effect alternating with a stimulating effect, which makes him want to dance too. The sexual side is of course not lost on him but it is not, in the good Oriental dance, merely a spur to sexual desire if it is that at all. Rather, I am convinced from my observation of many audiences, the quickening of sexual appetite is counteracted by the purely visual pleasure in the liquid motion and the aural delight in the music; this combination produces at times an almost somnolent calm, which is broken with the quickening of the tempo and a change in rhythm. I should describe the appeal of the dance, indeed, in its own milieu, as one of pure *voyeurisme.*

It is instructive to compare the *danse du ventre* with that great American (and now European) attraction, the strip-tease. The differences are profound. Just as the soul of the Oriental dance is motion within a limited spatial compass, so the soul of the strip-tease is display during locomotion. The key to both is in the climax: in the strip-tease, nudity (or the closest the dancer thinks she can safely get to it); in the Oriental dance, motion. In the American dance, the music is incidental; in the Oriental dance, it is enjoyed for its own sake and moves the observers to participate by clapping hands, swaying the body and even getting up to join in the dance. In the strip-tease, display is so central that attention is riveted on the dancer's clothing and her manipulation of it; in the Oriental dance, the audience follows the dancer herself, as a total human frame, for the movements of head, arms and shoulders are as important as those of the torso. The strip-tease is meant to excite the observer's sexual desire; the *danse du ventre* is designed to excite it but also to pacify it. The strip-tease is *voyeurisme* but the prospect of nudity promises something more, which it never delivers; the Oriental dance, by its alternation of excitation with passivity, promises nothing beyond the dance. So the one is pure *voyeurisme;* the other a fantasy in which the observer must imagine the true climax, which is always promised but never offered. The strip-tease is "American" or "Western" in its emphasis upon the ultimate—nudity—and its coy retreat from climax. The *danse du ventre* is "Oriental" in its partially passive nature and the acquiescence of the audience in demanding less but getting all that is promised.

The valiant and lascivious moor

If the Oriental dance is so magnificent and appealing, why is it not more popular in Europe and America? I believe it is because we have become victims of our own stereotypes and ambivalence. We have associated the dance with sex, which we like but do not commonly rate as very artistic, because to do so would be to dignify something that our religious tradition deems "sinful."

This attitude toward the Turks, the Arabs, the Moslems in general, has pervaded Western culture since the Crusades, when we rediscovered the Moslem Arab world as conquerors. Previously, no one had doubted the material and cultural superiority of the Near Eastern countries over those of Western Europe. The Crusades revealed Europe the more powerful civilization but the Near East the more cultivated and refined one. The poetry of medieval European chivalry, beginning with the love lyrics of the Provençal troubadours at the end of the eleventh century, derived from the Arabic poetry of Spain. Several centuries later Europe discovered *The Thousand and One Nights* and devoured and imitated them.

European notions of superiority over the East grew as European art flourished, exploration discovered new worlds and conquered them, and philosophical inquiry and speculation led to the triumphs of science and technology. Yet some Europeans continued to wonder whether their morality was superior to the East's. A great English traveler in the late eighteenth century, William George Browne, argued that the European's "impatience, activity, and sanguine hope" led to frustration because, as he found that "improvement is infinite," success could never satisfy him. The Oriental's "gravity" and "patience" and his habits in general were "correct, springing from the objects around him," though also "limited to those objects." Seeking less, he was contented with less and therefore happier.[25]

On relations between men and women, Browne, unlike most European observers of Moslem society, did not automatically and self-righteously condemn seclusion and subordination of women to men. European women, he remarked, grew tired of their "frigid adulation" by men and turned to sensual gratification. But European men did not seclude their women, as did Oriental men, to prevent their seeking such pleasure. For by this time European women considered themselves the equal of men, and so began to select their mates according to their own wishes. The result was that men had to win and hold their women by "varied foppery and grimace." And Browne adds: "Hence the romantic tales of our novels, hence the inconsequential conduct of their heroes, and hence the agitations of our societies, at which the

Orientals would smile." He was not sure, therefore, that the European's pride in displaying his wife was better or wiser than the Oriental's habit of secluding his. The consequence of the European manner? "From familiarities with a variety of men which, by being public, are authorized, she is induced to try them in private. The man becomes unhappy and ridiculous, the wife disgraced, and the lover impoverished. Little or nothing is known of this in the East." [26]

The difference persists to this day. In most of the Near East, except among a few highly Westernized people in cities, a woman who makes herself look sexually attractive in public is considered an easy mark. The logical assumption is that she would not want to exhibit her charms to anyone but her husband unless she was prepared to sell or give them away. Even now most Near Eastern women make themselves attractive only to their husbands. In our society women take great pains to look beautiful before women and men in public. At home the middle-class woman wears slacks, no make-up, and in general looks and works like a combination machine-tender and chauffeur. This is how she greets her husband. But when she goes out in the evening, she primps and dresses carefully and then is seated next to other men who can admire her while her husband is supposed to mix with other women. When she goes home, she gets ready for bed by removing her make-up and making herself less attractive again. In the East the opposite prevails. There, the wife does not beautify herself when she goes out, but she spends an hour making herself attractive to her husband before she goes to bed. I should add that, logical as this arrangement seems, it is one that Near Eastern women want to abandon. Is it any wonder, though, that Browne came to this conclusion?—"While vanity instigates us to claim an undisputed superiority, experience often compels us to doubt the validity of the sentence on which we insist." [27]

So Europeans became ambivalent about the civilization of Islam: it was inferior, they thought, but they had some lingering doubts. Europeans began to think of the East as both sensual and spiritual, worldly and noble. This ambivalence runs through European literature and art. Shakespeare has the tragic hero of *Othello* called the "valiant moor" and the "lascivious moor." [28]

The vogue of the "Turk," the "Moor" and the "Mussulman" settled into a comfortable cliché of eroticism which found expression in the court ballet of seventeenth-century France, Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, and the paintings of Ingres and Delacroix. In one court ballet performed for Louis XIII, even the eunuchs are made to appear potent! Two boast (in verse): "Young coquettes of Paris,/ to avoid giving your husbands/cause to imagine things,/ask *us* to serve you/ and you will see that behind our disguises/ we have the means to delight you." [29] European ideas of Oriental virility extended to women. In another ballet of the same period, concubines complain that Islamic law is unfair because it permits men to marry several wives but does not grant women the corresponding privilege.[30] A century or so later Voltaire used the unfavorable stereotype of the "Turk" and the Moslem to attack all religious fanaticism and superstition. He found it convenient, in his play *Fanaticism, or Mohammed the Prophet*, to show Moslems as the fanatics and Mohammed as a "false prophet" when he wanted to criticize the excesses of faiths closer to his own time and place.

At the other extreme, nineteenth-century European romantics cultivated the notion of Oriental nobility and spirituality. In his treatise on love, Stendhal in 1822 paid tribute to the majestic Arab in his primitive tent who taught Europe finesse: ". . . we owe what is noble in our customs to these Crusades and to the Moors of Spain." [31] A generation later Disraeli, in *Tancred*, his boring novel with a message, put these words into the mouth of his pompous, self-righteous hero: "I have been the unconscious agent in petty machinations. I must return to the Desert to recover the purity of my mind. It is Arabia alone that can regenerate the world." [32] The Oriental cult took other simply exotic forms in Mme. de Staël's turban, for example, and in the minaret-roofed Turkish cafes which first became popular in Vienna, then in Paris and all through Europe after the Turkish armies had beseiged Vienna in 1683.[33]

Shelley's long narrative poem, which he wrote in 1817 and called *Laon and Cythna*, is an especially clear case of ambivalence. Disappointed in the violence and aftermath of the French Revolution, he wanted to show the possibility of a peaceful re-

volt. So he selected, of course, a Moslem ruler to be deposed: the extent of his tyranny was the measure of precious liberty gained. But that meant the people who revolted, the Moslems, must be favorably and unexpectedly portrayed as lovers of freedom. Shelley's publisher, incidentally, insisted that the poem be called *The Revolt of Islam,* though the revolt itself is only a small part of the poem. There seems to be no explanation for this choice, so one suspects that the publisher wanted to capitalize on two of the era's obsessions: revolution and the Orient. Indeed, perhaps, that is no more than Shelley himself wished.

L'almee de Flaubert

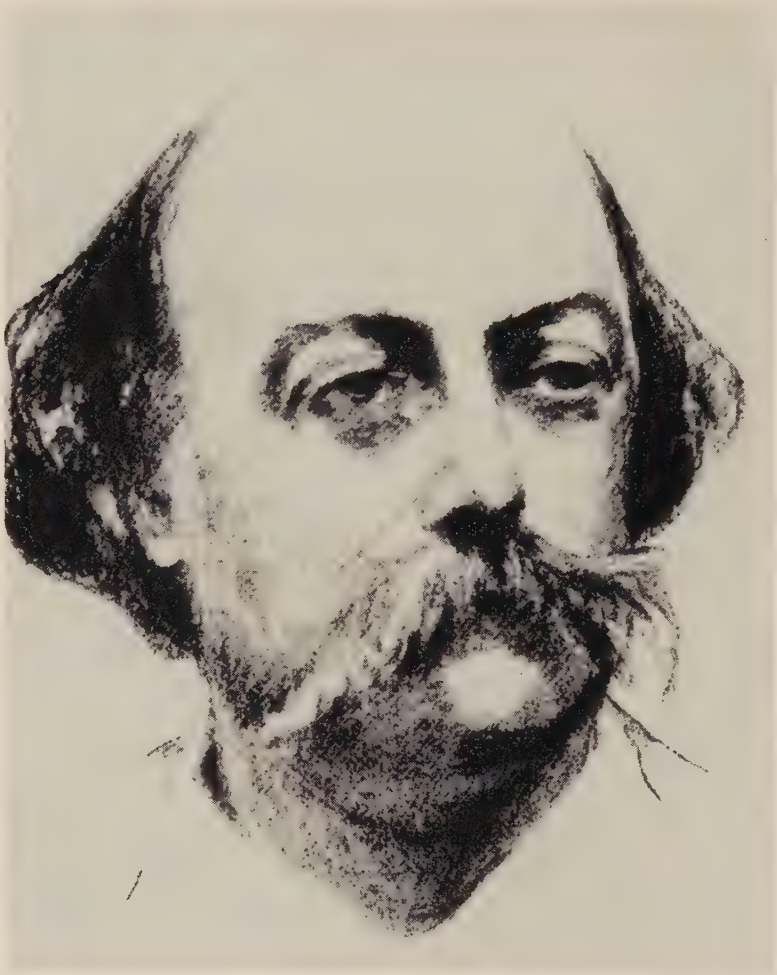
By the 1830's the voyage to Alexandria, Cairo, and up the Nile to Nubia was becoming a common venture for Europeans. Egypt was then ruled by Muhammad Ali, an Albanian-born soldier in the Ottoman Sultan's army, who made a great effort to modernize and industrialize the country and to make it the center of a new dynastic empire. He brought in European advisers, built factories, created a strong army and navy—and became ashamed, I suppose, not only of his domain's economic backwardness but of its popular arts as well. Partly because of the bad impression they made on foreigners and partly because of pressure from religious leaders, Muhammad Ali barred the public dancing girls from the Cairo area in 1834. There were two results. First, he increased personal taxes to make up for the revenue he lost by this burst of moral zeal. Second, the number of male Oriental dancers increased,[34] and they, as Flaubert found, were often more audacious and salacious than the girls.[35] The male dancers were already famous before the banishment of the *almées.* An artist who accompanied Napoleon's forces in Egypt describes a party arranged on order of General Menou at Rosetta. The entertainment following dinner was obscene: ". . . the performers, all of

them of the male sex, presented, in the most indecent way, scenes which love has reserved for the two sexes in the silence and mystery of the night." [36] When a few girls thought they could evade the new restriction, Muhammad Ali banished them to Esna, about 500 miles from their Cairo haunts. One of the youngest and best-known of the *almées,* Safiya, managed to escape this fate for a while. The favorite of the Cairo elite, she became the mistress of Muhammad Ali's grandson, Abbas, who became viceroy of Egypt in 1849. When he found that Safiya had sold his presents to second-hand dealers in the bazaar, Abbas personally gave her a few hundred lashes and shipped her off to Esna to join her colleagues.[37]

This small town until then could boast only a few important ruins, such as the temple built in the fifteenth century B.C. by the humanist emperor Thothmes III, one of the greatest rulers of ancient Egypt, and apparently reconstructed by several Roman emperors seventeen hundred years later. Even before the Napoleonic invasion in 1798, Esna seems to have been favored by Egyptian rulers as a place to banish leading competitors and others who met with royal disapproval. The English traveler, Browne, in 1792 called it the "residence of fugitive Beys. They are very poor and dejected," he added, "in consequence of their long exclusion from the government." [38]

The advent of the dancing girls brought a new and greater fame to Esna and added a different and more numerous class of tourist to the few hardy sight-seers who had been drawn to the little Nile town. Among the newer type were the American George Curtis and the Frenchman Gustave Flaubert. Like many other tourists they went to see Safiya, who called herself Kutchuk Hanem, Turkish for "Little Princess."

Flaubert's deep involvement with Kutchuk Hanem is one of those stories out of the Montmartre rather than the staid little bourgeois town of Croisset where he spent all his adult life except for a couple of years of travel in the East—a story more appropriate to a romantic painter than to the leader of the French realistic novel. He was under no illusion as to the famous dancer's sideline, for in a letter to his friend, the poet Louis Bouilhet, he described her as a "very celebrated courtesan." He



Gustave Flaubert. Portrait by Mme. F. Sabatier
(Édouard Maynial, *Flaubert*)

first saw her in her house as she stood at the top of a staircase after having bathed, bare beneath a transparent garment of purple gauze. "She is a regal-looking creature," he wrote to Bouilhet, "large-breasted, fleshy, with slit nostrils, enormous eyes, and magnificent knees . . ." [39] This last anatomical feature seems to have affected Flaubert strongly, for in his travel notes he wrote of "the magnificent, absolutely sculptural design of her knees." [40]

Before she danced, Flaubert and his companion in turn went downstairs to bed with her. After her dance, they went to see the ancient ruins, then back to Kutchuk Hanem's house for more dancing. "When it was time to leave," Flaubert wrote to Bouilhet, "I did not go. Kutchuk was hardly eager to put us up for the night, out of fear of thieves who were likely to come, knowing that there were foreigners in the house. . . . I went down to the ground floor into Kutchuk's room. A wick was burning in an antique-style lamp hanging on the wall. . . . Her body was sweaty; she was tired from dancing, and cold. I covered her with my fur coat and she fell asleep. As for me, I hardly closed an eye. I spent the night feeling profound, endless, dream-like impulses." [41]

Flaubert's departure the next morning did not end his affair with Kutchuk Hanem. On his return down the Nile to Cairo several weeks later, he stopped at Esna again where, as he wrote to Bouilhet, "I saw Kutchuk Hanem again; it was sad. I found her changed. She had been sick. The weather was oppressive and cloudy. . . . I stared at her for a long while to keep a picture of her in my mind. When I left, we told her we would return the next day, but we did not. I relished the bitterness of the whole thing; that was the main thing—it hit me hard." [42]

In Constantinople five months later Flaubert still thought of his experiences at Esna. "Why," he meditated in a letter to Bouilhet, "have I a melancholy desire to return to Egypt, to go back up the Nile to see Kutchuk Hanem? . . . All the same, I spent a night there such as one seldom experiences in a lifetime." [43]

So stirred was Flaubert by his affair with Kutchuk Hanem, that his letters to Bouilhet inspired the latter to write a poem about the dancer, though it was rather a feeble one.[44] The emotional energy Flaubert put into this relationship contrasts with the casual way she took it. He understood the disparity in their reaction to it, for in his travel notes concerning the night he spent with Kutchuk Hanem he wrote wistfully: "How flattering it would be to the pride, if at the moment of leaving you were sure that you left a memory behind, that she would think of you more than of the others who have been there, that you would remain in her heart!" [45] This is the vain dream of the romantic young artist: to leave an impression upon the whore.

Later, when his mistress, the poetess Louise Colet, was shocked by the details of the affair at Esna, which she read about in his travel notes, Flaubert reassured her that Kutchuk Hanem was not touched by it emotionally. She merely took him for what he was to her: a foreigner with money. Bouilhet's poem he dismissed as mere poetry. He then gave Louise Colet an analysis of the Oriental woman which borrowed all the old saws: that she was incapable of feeling even physical pleasure in love because of clitorectomy, and that her whole existence lay only in primping and beautifying herself.[46] Louise, who was obsessed by the image of Kutchuk Hanem, had the last word, however, for in 1869, after she and Flaubert had separated, she went to Egypt for the opening of the Suez Canal and inquired about the aging *almée,* already a legend. Flaubert, Louise wrote bitterly, "would be interested could he now see one of the seductive dancing girls who served his pleasure—and whom my heart found revolting when I read of her in his travel notes. She is still living—a living mummy." [47] She saw many dancing girls on her travels up the Nile but at Esna she seems deliberately to have avoided seeing them.[48]

How are we to estimate the impact of the dancer upon the young writer? It is entirely possible, though the evidence is not conclusive, that his affair with Kutchuk Hanem and his journey through the Middle East both stimulated him to create and ultimately killed him. One of his leading biographers has insisted: "His travel in Egypt was certainly the supreme fact of his existence." [49] His companion on the journey, Maxime du Camp, claimed it was Egypt that gave Flaubert the inspiration for the name of the heroine in his first and greatest work, *Madame Bovary.*[50] Though this is not very significant and has in any case been denied by Flaubert scholars, it is clear that until his return from this two-year journey Flaubert had written little and published less. As soon as he returned to Croisset, he set seriously to work on *Madame Bovary,* writing steadily for five years until he finished the masterpiece. In several later novels, little touches of his Egyptian experience appear—a character in one, a remark or an observation in another. But if he returned from the East emotionally and artistically rejuvenated, he had also aged more

than the two years he had been away. At Venice, on his way home, he shocked his mother by his appearance. He had lost hair, grown heavy, and his face had become streaked and reddened with veins.[51] Several medical assessments of these symptoms and of Flaubert's later medical history have suggested that he suffered not from epilepsy, as is commonly supposed, but from syphillis. The hemorrhage which caused his death, it is said, could have been caused by the disease he contracted in the company of Kutchuk Hanem.[52]

Kutchuk Hanem (Auriant, *Koutchuk-Hanem, l'almée de Flaubert*)

Show business

I don't know whether this story of the Western writer and the Arab dancer is being repeated anywhere today. I doubt that it could, because both callings have changed somewhat. The young writers today are more sophisticated, less easily moved; their ideal is to be cool and unimpressionable. And such inspiration as they profess to find in exotic cultures—Vedanta and Zen Buddhism—comes from places further East. Nor are Oriental dancers the same as in Flaubert's day. They are no longer born into families who raise them especially to become dancers; the decision to

follow such a career is now a more deliberate and personal one. They no longer instruct the ladies of the harem in the arts of seduction and love. The leading dancers today are Westernized young women who think about managers, contracts and films; some move in a world of sports cars, Paris gowns, fancy villas and real estate deals. There seems to be less dedication to the art, and yet the dancers, I believe, are better, more artful and not so dependent upon unmitigated sexual excitation as a technique. They are, paradoxically, at once less romantic, less *engagé,* and technically more accomplished, more business-like.

Oriental dancers today, moreover, are no longer prostitutes available to any visitor with the price of admission. Whatever may be their private moral character, it is probably no worse or better than that of young women in America or Europe who want to be paid for their beauty or talent in the entertainment business, in which men are so powerful as entrepreneurs in the back office, as audience in front, and in the publicity apparatus in between.

Modernization and nationalism have wrought changes even in the cabarets where the dancers perform. The expensive ones used to present only European acts which were announced in French, while the cheap ones presented only Arab acts announced in Arabic. Now the first kind feature an Oriental dancer, sometimes even a singer, and announce the acts in Arabic as well as French. Some of the second kind have added European acts, cut down on the Oriental dancing and singing, and make announcements in both languages. Indeed, old-fashioned local color has become so scarce in Cairo these days that a new cabaret successfully cultivates it as folklore for sophisticates, who want to go slumming in tented, sumptuous Eastern style in the desert just beyond the pyramids.

In one respect, Oriental dancing as a career today (whether or not practiced in association with prostitution) is similar to what it was a hundred years ago and more: it is still an avenue to fame and material success for a few girls of poor families who would otherwise wind up as the wives of underpaid factory or farm laborers or minor clerks and raise five or six children for them in dirt, poverty and ill health. The average uneducated

worker in a Middle Eastern city earns about five to ten dollars a week, and those who work in shops and offices are paid a bit more. Even the Oriental dancer who spends her nights cajoling poor men to buy drinks in a joint makes twice that much, while the good dancers in the fancy cabarets make twenty to thirty dollars a night. A very successful one may draw as much as four or five hundred dollars a week in a night club, not including outside dates for various celebrations or movie contracts. She doesn't keep it all, of course; most dancers have agents who take the usual ten per cent, and then they must provide their costumes, which cost from fifty to four hundred dollars each. A good dancer needs at least three or four such costumes, made by special dressmakers. What she earns depends not only upon her popularity and ability but also upon the city in which she performs. Except for a very few at the very top of the profession, most dancers accept less in Cairo, where they come to make their reputations, than, say, in a place like oil-rich Kuweit, where there is nothing to attract them but money.

What success costs the Oriental dancer in the favors she must return for favors given is another story. Middle Eastern show business is populated by the same kind of promoters, hangers-on, and promisers of movie contracts as its Western counterpart. Yasmine told me, "It is very difficult sometimes to separate the serious business man who can make good on a promise from the pretender who is looking for something else—but I'm learning." Though she is only twenty-four years old, Yasmine has knocked around night clubs in North Africa and the Middle East for nine years now. Her story may or may not be "typical" in all its details, but it gives a good idea of the life and times of the Oriental dancer today.

Like a small number of other leading performers, Yasmine is not strictly Arab, though she is culturally assimilated to the Arabs. She was born Marlene Dermarkar to Armenian parents in Aleppo. Very early in her life, her parents moved to Beirut, where Yasmine attended a Roman Catholic school—she herself belongs to the Greek Catholics, a small group affiliated to Rome. At fourteen, considered a good dancer among her girl friends, she left school and took some lessons. Impressed by the movies, which

she loved, she was drawn to show business by its glamor and promise of reward. Physically well-developed and attractive, though small and not beautiful, she was soon overcome with ambition, and at fifteen she persuaded her mother to accompany

Nineteenth-century dancing girls (James Augustus St. John, *Oriental Album*)

her on the dreary circuit of seedy cabarets in Cyprus, Khartum, Athens, Ankara and Baghdad. Yasmine earned enough to support their travels by doing two numbers, one European and one Oriental. When she noticed that her Oriental dance brought

forth greater appreciation, she began to practice several hours daily before a mirror and to study the movements of the famous Oriental dancers in the movies. "Although my European number made me seem a higher class entertainer," she says, "I knew I had a better chance for real success as an Oriental dancer. And above everything I *must* be successful." She did better with her Oriental number alone and, at twenty-one, she went to Cairo determined to make good in the big town whose newspapers, magazines, and films go all over the Arab world.

By hard work and persistence Yasmine deliberately ingratiated herself with managers and newspaper men, and anyone who could help her get ahead. These efforts were facilitated by her engaging personality, which combines friendliness with great intensity of feeling to the point where she sometimes lacks a sense of humor. When she got a chance to perform in a leading Cairo night club, she worked feverishly to win a reputation. She devoted special attention to the details of her costumes, which she makes herself. She added wooden clappers to the usual castanets and distributed flowers among the audience—anything to give herself some distinction. A moderate success in 1958, she returned to Cairo in the spring of 1959, this time without her mother, who refused to go along with Yasmine's vaulting ambitions. She performed in the leading Cairo night clubs and then made the biggest strike of all. In the fall of 1960 she became the first belly-dancer to appear regularly at the Nile Hilton Hotel. Now she is among the two or three best-known performers. Having improved steadily under her own impossibly high standards, she is at last ranked among the five or six best dancers Cairo has seen in the last fifteen years or so. Yet her work is uneven. Since she is constantly striving and straining for greater success, she has been unable to routinize her performances—the result is that she can be great one night and average the next.

Always searching for something big, Yasmine has discovered that she must be even more than a successful Oriental dancer—she must be nothing less than a film star in the Arab world. If she succeeds in the movies, she will quit dancing; if she does not, she will try to widen her reputation as a dancer. But acting is her passion now. "When I danced before the cameras," she said, "I

knew that I wanted to be a great film actress. I feel I can do it—anyway I must try, no matter what happens." She has had a few small dancing parts in Arab films but has not yet gained what she hopes will be her opportunity to become a dramatic star. She mistakenly thought she had that opportunity when she was the second female lead in an Egyptian film. She played a dumb girl who becomes a dancer and then regains her speech in a crisis. This was very convenient, because it called for her to act and dance but not to speak. Arabic is her native language, of course, but she speaks it like a Syrian, whereas Egyptian Arabic is better known in films. So she began taking intensive lessons in Egyptian pronunciation to widen her range as a film actress.

A consuming ambition like Yasmine's leaves no time or energy for anything not calculated to further her career. She feels the need of male affection, for she is intensely emotional, self-centered, and did not enjoy a normal family life at home. Her parents separated when she was only four years old, and though she is on speaking terms with her father she has never been close to him; she feels, moreover, that he treated her mother badly from the start. Around men since the age of fifteen, she has had numerous proposals and even more propositions. She has been in love twice, with a handsome American officer in Ankara and a Lebanese. Neither was her ideal: a man who is not necessarily good-looking but is serious, strong, educated, and above all successful and well-known. Her favorite American movie stars, which may help explain this preference, are Charlton Heston and William Holden. But she has no time now for love affairs that will involve her emotionally. "When I am a great success," she promises herself, "I'll have time for friends and for love."

Yasmine's single-minded devotion to self-advancement and her eagerness to abandon dancing as a career are typical of the change that has been wrought in the Oriental dancer. The dance is much the same as it was a century ago and more. But most of the dancers, no longer bred for the art, corrupted by the world of mass media, and made sophisticated by the public relations apparatus, feel committed to it, not as a true calling, but only as a means to fame and fortune. Kutchuk Hanem was never like that.

Samia Gamal (Collection of Walter Terry)

La Meri in her Arabic dance. Photo by Marcus Blechman (Dance Collection, The New York Public Library)

Learning the Danse du Ventre

by LA MERI

The seeker-after-knowledge in the East will often come upon conflicting opinions regarding the origins and beginnings of an art that has not been documented by the written word. When I studied in Fez in 1929, I was told by my teacher, Fatma, that the *danse du ventre* was of ritualistic origin, and was, at that time, still performed at the bedsides of women in childbirth. She also told me that, in its ritualistic form, men were not allowed to see the dance.

Armen Ohanian writes:

> Thus in Cairo one evening I saw, with sick incredulous eyes, one of our most sacred dances degraded into a bestiality horrible and revolting. It is our poem of the mystery and pain of motherhood, which all true Asiatic men watch with reverence and humility, in the far-away corners of Asia where the destructive breath of the Occident has not yet penetrated. In this olden Asia which has kept the dance in its primitive purity, it represents maternity, the mysterious conception of life, the suffering and the joy with which a new soul is brought into the world. Could any man born of woman contemplate this most holy subject, expressed in an art so pure and so ritualistic as our eastern dance, with less than profound reverence? Such is our Asiatic veneration of motherhood, that there are countries and tribes whose most binding oath is sworn upon the stomach, because it is from this sacred cup that humanity has issued.
>
> But the spirit of the Occident had touched this holy dance, and it became the horrible "danse du ventre," the "hoochie-koochie." To me, a nauseating revelation of unsuspected depths of human bestiality, to others it was—amusing. I heard the lean Europeans chuckling, I saw lascivious smiles upon even the lips of Asiastics, and I fled.[53]

Among the so-called primitive peoples there are many examples of therapy dances, which involve the pelvis and abdomen. Modern Hawaii has forgotten her "ohelo" hula, a dance done in a reclining position for pregnancy therapy. In 1936 the Maoris of New Zealand still performed their version of this dance, or, at least, the older people did. At that time it brought forth only laughter from watching Maoris, but in ancient times it was done by all, every morning, as a therapeutic exercise. So I find reason enough to be convinced that the *danse du ventre* has its origins in ritual, and not in the sexual excitation, which is too often attributed to it.

The Koran indicted the secular written word and the pictorial image of living things. So in olden days the dancer and musician were important to the people as purveyors of news. Later Mohammed himself banned music and dance, and the arts withered. But, somehow, they managed to keep alive. Quite possibly it was under Mohammed's ban that the ritualism of certain dances perished.

I know of no other name for the *danse du ventre*. In spite of my requests for a "native" name, I was always told that this was its only title. This, also, leads me to believe that, as entertainment, the dance appeared only after the advent of the French. (Any other dances I learned or inquired about seemed to have native titles.) I do not recall ever having heard it called "belly-dance" till relatively recently. Perhaps the G.I.'s preferred the literal translation to the use of the French name.

As in all forms of dance, there are mediocre as well as good exponents. One can scarcely hope to see the best in the tourist-traps of the ports, yet many thoughtless travelers will form an outspoken opinion of the entire dance-form from spending one evening in a Tunis cafe. Also, much of the over-all emotional impact is lost on the average Westerner since he has no audial sympathy with the accompanying music. To the Asian, the music plays no small part in the evocation of the dance-mood.

Many Westerners have become so fascinated with the control of the abdominal muscles in the *danse du ventre* that they have been quite blind to any other techniques. In its entirety the dance is a marvel of isolated muscular control. Not only do the

muscles of the belly respond, but all the muscles of the torso and arms, and, sometimes, of the neck and face. The technique is a pure muscular contract-release. The wonder is that these muscles respond without any answering tensions in other parts of the body. Breasts are moved separately or together. Biceps respond rhythmically. As for the abdominal muscles, such is the strength of the dancer that she can kneel and, by the power of belly contractions, slide her way across the floor. (This movement is not to be confused with the pelvic thrust—the burlesque "bump"—which can be executed with no contraction at all in the abdominal muscles.) The constant use of the belly muscles often develops this part of the body to undue proportions; but this, in a dancer, is considered a sign of artistic beauty. To acccentuate the movement, a sash or wide, heavy belt is generally worn just under the waist in back and dipping below the belly in front. Sometimes there is fringe on the belt.

The foot-work, which is used as a sort of interlude to the muscle-control passages, is always a gliding two-step, or chassé. The arms are serpentine, graceful, lyric. The hands are generally easily-flat. Sometimes the pelvis itself is moved in a side-to-side, circular or figure-eight air-design, much as is seen in certain Polynesian dances, or, sometimes, in the Moslem dances of North India. These pelvic movements are relaxed and legato (as against the staccato control of Tahiti), and usually accompany the mimic passages, or decorative arm movements. The mime seldom tells a story, but it is employed to create an atmosphere, using the gestures of calling attention to personal beauty, of warding off evil, and such.

Crotales, or *chinchines,* are sometimes used. These are four tiny, brass cymbals, two to each hand, that are attached to the thumb and middle finger. The technique for playing these *crotales* is far more difficult than it would seem, besides requiring a sure ear for music and counter-rhythm.

The position of "falling to the floor," so often described by the voyager, is done from the knees; the dancer then arches backward until her head touches the floor. This "backbend" is further enhanced by an upper torso movement of the breast or shoulders. As the head reaches the floor from the backbend, the

body slowly eases down until the entire spine is resting on the floor, with the knees sharply bent and the feet outside of and close to the thighs.

More often than not, the belly-dance, as performed by the cheap entertainer, is done with a facial expression so lacking in interest in the entire proceeding that I wonder how any observer can be attracted to so indifferent a personality. There is certainly no "come-hither" in the glance, nor indeed any desire to please at all. The dancer is performing an acrobatic tour-de-force and, apparently, couldn't care less whether you like it or not.

Since the dance is not "routined," but improvised on a form, it is learned without benefit of preparatory physical training. There is a small orchestra that follows the dancer-teacher, who goes through the dance while the pupil follows along as best she can. This is repeated until the dance is learned. It is a slow, painful method, beset with surprises for the green Westerner. My own efforts to control my belly muscles were met with gales of laughter from teacher and orchestra alike. The consensus of opinion was that I didn't have enough belly to make the effort worthwhile.

As a footnote to the system of on-the-spot dance improvisation, let me tell you of my experience with a Moroccan orchestra. During the Paris Exposition in 1930 I gave a concert at the Champs-Élysées Theatre in which I used, for my ethnic dance section, typical orchestras from several countries, which were represented at the Exposition. To my requests for a rehearsal, each of these yielded, save only the Moroccans. On the night of the performance they arrived, asked me what dance I was doing, followed me onto the stage, and played until I made my exit. For a Westerner, it was not a relaxing experience!

These dances, which in Fez are called "Arabic" and which the Arabians call "Moroccan," can be seen in certain typical cafes in New York. If the outlander sits quietly in his corner until two or three A.M., he will be rewarded by seeing the Near Eastern audience, one by one, rise and dance with the performer. These men do not touch the female dancer, but only give vent to their own rhythm-obsession.

This, then, is the *danse du ventre,* of evil reputation in the

Occident. Surely it was once a ritual, since even the folk can perform fragments of it. Like the dance of "Spilled Meal," its magic is forgotten. Perhaps its serpentine quality comes from the Beshrin tribes, the Kushites of the Bible, who were animal worshippers. And such is the similarity of all the dances of the Near East, that I am persuaded it was thus that Salome danced.

Dancing girl
(James Augustus St. John,
Egypt and Nubia)

footnotes

1. *The New York Times,* Jan. 4, 1961, p. 29. *New York World-Telegram and Sun,* Jan. 10-13, 1961. *Time,* Jan. 13, 1961, pp. 54, 57.

2. See report in *N. Y. Times,* Nov. 27, 1960, Sec. I, p. 24.

3. 'Ali Ibn Husain al-Mas'ūdī, *Les Prairies d'Or,* tr. C. Barbier de Meynard (Paris: Société Asiatique, 1874) VIII, 100-01. This edition gives also the Arabic text of this work, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma'ādin al-Jawhar.*

4. First edition 1836. See ch. 19 in all editions. In Everyman's Library edition, pp. 386-87.

5. Irene Lexová, *Ancient Egyptian Dances* (Prague: Oriental Institute, 1935), Preface and p. 72.

6. *Juvenal and Persius,* tr. G. G. Ramsay (Loeb Classical Library, New York: Putnam's, 1924), Satire XI, lines 162 ff., pp. 232-33.

7. *Epigrams,* tr. Walter C. A. Ker (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), I, Book V, No. LXXVIII, lines 25 ff., pp. 350-51.

8. *Déscription de l'Égypte. État Moderne* (Paris: L'Imprimerie Impériale, 1809), I, 695 and II, 2nd Part, 733.

9. Letter to Louis Bouilhet, March 13, 1850, in Flaubert, *Correspondance* (Paris: Charpentier, 1905), I, 284, and Francis Steegmuller, tr. and ed., *The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953), p. 102.

10. George William Curtis, *Nile Notes of a "Howadji." Or, The American in Egypt* (1851) (London: Vizetelly, n.d.), pp. 88-90. On Curtis, see William M. Payne, *Leading American Essayists* (New York: Holt, 1910), pp. 317-95.

11. *Ibid.,* p. 92.

12. *Egypt and Nubia* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1845), p. 275.

13. *Ibid.,* p. 268.

14. Letter of Feb. 16, 1873, in *The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams,* ed. Ward Thoron (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), p. 75.

15. *The Selected Letters of Henry Adams,* ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), pp. 179-80.

16. Letter to Elizabeth Cameron, from Samoa, Oct. 9, 1890, *ibid.,* pp. 116-18.

17. The source for the information about Bloom is *The Autobiography of Sol Bloom* (New York: Putnam's, 1948), pp. 107-23, 134-36.

18. Rossiter Johnson, ed., *A History of The World's Columbian Exposition Held in Chicago in 1893.* By Authority of the Board of Directors (New York: Appleton, 1897), I, 334-40.

19. *World's Columbian Exposition Illustrated,* III (Sept. 1893), p. 164.

20. Edo McCullough, *Good Old Coney Island* (New York: Scribners, 1957), pp. 254-55.

21. For the opportunity to see parts of Hunt's diary, I am indebted to Mr. Alan Burnham, head of the American Architectural Archive, at Greenwich, Connecticut.

22. Achille Constant Théodore Émile Prisse d'Avennes, *Petits Mémoires Secrets sur la Cour d'Égypte suivis d'une Étude sur les Almées* (Paris: Jacques Bernard, 1930), pp. 55-6.

23. Flaubert, *Correspondance,* I, 226, and Francis Steegmuller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary* (London: Collins, 1947), p. 140.

24. *Egypt and Nubia,* p. 269.

25. *Travels in Africa, Egypt, and Syria, from the year 1792 to 1798* (London: Cadell, Davies, Longman and Rees, 1799), pp. 426, 440-41.

26. *Ibid.,* pp. 431-32.

27. *Ibid.,* p. 425.

28. Act I, Scenes 1 and 3.

29. Clarence Dana Rouillard, *The Turk in French History, Thought and Literature (1520-1660)* (Paris: Boivin, 1941), p. 635.
The original verse follows:

> Jeunes coquettes de Paris,
> Pour donner à vos maris
> Aucun sujet à estre fantasques,
> Commandez-nous de vous servir,
> Et vous verrez que sous nos masques
> Nous avons de quoi vous ravir.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 636.

31. *De l'Amour*, ed. Henri Martineau (Paris: Le Divan, 1957), p. 171, and translation, *On Love* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, n.d.), p. 191.

32. *Tancred, or The New Crusade* (London: Longmans, Green, 1907), p. 465.

33. S. E. Rasmussen, *Towns and Buildings* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1951), pp. 145-46, 161.

34. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, p. 384, and Auriant, "Histoire de Safiya," *Les Marges*, XXXVI (May 1926), pp. 86-7.

35. Letter to Louis Bouilhet, undated, written at end of 1849 or early in 1850, Flaubert, *Correspondance*, I, 265-66, and Steegmuller, *The Selected Letters . . .*, pp. 94-5.

36. Dominique Vivant Denon, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*, tr. Arthur Aikin (New York: Heard and Forman, 1803), I, 104.

37. Auriant, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

38. Browne, *Travels in Africa . . .*, pp. 139-40.

39. Letter of March 13, 1850, Flaubert, *Correspondance*, I, 283, and Steegmuller, *The Selected Letters . . .*, p. 102.

40. Steegmuller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, p. 161.

41. Letter of March 13, 1850, Flaubert, *Correspondance*, I, 284-85, and Steegmuller, *The Selected Letters . . .*, pp. 102-03.

42. Letter of June 4, 1850, Flaubert, *Correspondance*, I, 309, and Steegmuller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, p. 168.

43. Letter of Nov. 14, 1850, Flaubert, *Correspondance*, II, 13, and Steegmuller, *The Selected Letters . . .*, p. 109.

44. Louis Bouilhet, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1881), pp. 28-9.

45. Steegmuller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, p. 162.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 255-56.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

48. Jean-Marie Carré, *Voyageurs et Écrivains Francais en Égypte* (Cairo: L'Institut Francais d'Archéologie Orientale, 1932), II, 307-08.

49. L. Bertrand, quoted in Carré, *ibid.*, II, 125.

50. *Ibid.*, II, 100.

51. Steegmuller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, p. 195.

52. Felix Regnault, "Le Malade Flaubert," *Revue Moderne de Médecine et de Chirurgie*, XXV (Nov. 1927), pp. 342-47.

53. *The Dancer of Shamahka*, tr. Rose Wilder Lane (New York, 1923), pp. 261-62.